

SKIN

Leah Browning

I told Jeremiah I knew of a place where we could go.

It's out a ways in the woods, I said. A cabin where the people that own it don't hardly spend any time. They have more than one house and don't need this one so much.

It took us almost half an hour to walk up there. I'd heard there was only a few houses around, and this one was all by its lonesome. We tried to be quick, looking like we knew where we were going.

The doors were locked, but one of the windows had a broken latch. Jer just pushed it in, didn't need to break the glass or nothing.

It was dark inside. Outside, there was still some light, but you couldn't tell it once you got in the house. I was afraid to turn on any lamps. The house was pretty far back from the road, but you just never know who might be watching.

After a second, my eyes got used to the dark. I could see all these creepy pictures on the walls, the kind where the people's eyes follow you around the room. I tried not to look at them. The whole thing was giving me a bad feeling, if you want to know the truth. I was afraid Jer would try to spook me, put a cold hand on the back of my neck or something like that, but I could tell he didn't like those following eyes any better than I did.

We went upstairs. The place was starting to feel like a witch house to me, but upstairs was different, not so dark, with a lot of them windows in the roof and a lot of plants all over the place. I couldn't understand why they didn't die without water, but when Jeremiah went to look around downstairs, I touched one, and then I knew that it stayed alive because it was fake. Not cheap plastic, but silk or something like that. I put my fingers on the leaves, feeling them.

Between the windows, the walls were all wood, all around the room, and there was a table off to the side with a bowl full of wood fruit. Wood apples painted a dark red. You had to look close to see that nothing in the room was real.

Behind the couches and tables there were more plants painted onto the back walls, and painted-on bookshelves full of painted-on books. In front of the couches, in the middle of the floor, was a big white bearskin rug.

I stopped eating meat a long time ago, and I hated the idea of a bear like that. I didn't think it was real, though, if you want to know the truth. I could touch the spines of the books on the wall and they were just stripes of colored paint on the wood. The books were big ones, things you would have heard of, like Shakespeare and them, but then you couldn't open them or nothing, so what was the point, if you know what I mean.

But the bear turned out to be a real bear after all. I put my hand on that white fur and it was so soft, and there was a head and everything, with eyes and a face. It killed me to see that. It had a real soft-looking face, too, like it wouldn't hurt a fly, even though before it was dead it was probably real fierce or something, not so soft as all that.

I couldn't stop touching it, and when Jeremiah came back he said what was I doing, on my knees next to the edge of the fur, petting it like it was a dog or something. He put his hand on it, too, though, and felt how it was. All soft-like. I couldn't find anything good, he said. They must not keep nothing here when they leave. Not even any clothes in the closets. Nothing in the drawers.

I wasn't surprised. These people's rich, but they're not going to go back to their regular everyday house and leave no diamond necklace in a cabin. It just don't make sense. Jeremiah doesn't use his head, sometimes, though, so he

thought they might. He opened all the drawers in all the bedrooms, still thinking there was a chance, never mind that all the ones he'd already done were empty.

You should take off your clothes, he said, and I said, What? because I was still thinking about rich people's jewelry.

This fur is so soft, he said. It makes me want to lie on it with you. He was on his haunches, but then he sat down on the bear's skin and patted his hand on its back. Sit down, he said.

I shook my head.

It was one thing to lie on the floor, or even sleep in the house, which was what I planned from the get-go, but I wanted to let that bear alone.

He just wouldn't stop, though, grabbing me 'round the waist and pulling me down on top of him. Where's the stuff, I said, and he said, Don't worry, baby. It's right here. I got everything you need.

I didn't like it when he talked like that. That's the kind of talk my mama hates out of him, or any man, but I tried not to think about her just then. I pulled away from him. He sighed, but he got everything ready. I held real still. It took him two tries to get the vein, and it hurt like the devil, but then it was okay.

After, we lay on the rug and I let him take off my jeans. The fur was so soft you couldn't believe it. I lay there in my bra and underwear. It was almost pitch black by that time, and the shape of my underwear looked real dark against that white bear fur.

Jeremiah was pressing himself all up against me, rubbing his legs on mine, and I could feel my pulse, that slow beat, beat, beat. I lay on my back and held onto the bear's fur with both hands.

Later, when I woke up, I couldn't remember where I was for a minute, but I could feel Jeremiah lying next to me, breathing loud, asleep.

It was the middle of the night, or maybe real early in the morning. It was still dark, but there was a moon out the window. My eyes started to be able to see the outlines of everything in the room. Jeremiah was still sleeping, but I had to get up.

I slipped back into my underwear and walked all around the house, touching everything, pretending like I belonged here, like these were my silk plants and my wood fruit.

Downstairs, I found the kitchen, and a couple of bedrooms. I imagined all the clothes I would have if I lived in a place like this, all my dresses and shoes and diamonds. I wouldn't bring them here to the cabin—maybe I would leave

them in a safe in my closet at home in my real house, or something like that, but I don't know. I never had diamonds. I don't know what diamond people do.

After we got back from the courthouse, Jeremiah's mama opened a jar she kept hidden in the back of her sock drawer and bought us rings for \$18 each at Walmart. I wanted to get mine engraved, but that was too much money, so I just stood there and didn't say nothing but thank you to his mama. She didn't like me much, I could tell, but what can you do.

So Jeremiah and I never had a honeymoon, or anything like that. In the middle of the night, while I walked around the cabin, I got the idea that this was our honeymoon. We'd never had anything nice. We deserved it.

I wanted to surprise Jer, maybe make something for him. There were pots and pans in the kitchen, but I couldn't find any food. The fridge was dead empty, not even a bottle of ketchup in there.

The best I could think of was go back upstairs and get dressed again. There were a few dollar bills, so old they'd gone soft, in the back pocket of my jeans.

Instead of sneaking out the window the way we came in, I just walked right out the front door. It was my house. These were my woods.

I walked fast along the path. I was glad I'd brought my jacket. It was so cold outside I could see my breath.

I walked to the store and picked out eggs and orange soda and a loaf of day-old bread for 99¢.

It was real early in the morning, but there were a lot of people who couldn't sleep, it seemed, and only one person working, so I stood in line for a long time, looking at magazines and wishing I had enough to buy one, just so I could do something stupid like sit in that house with no books and read about famous people and all their cars and houses and fancy clothes.

There was a clock spinning 'round on the wall by the customer service this whole time, and when it was her turn, the lady in front of me wanted to pay with a check, but she couldn't find her checkbook in this big old bag she had. She kept taking things out and saying, No, that's not it. Things like a tube of lipstick or something we could see perfectly well weren't no checkbook.

But she seemed like a nice lady, kind of old, with round gray curls and a face like a big pincushion, and she said to me, Sorry, like it mattered that I was standing there having to wait, so it gave me a good feeling toward her and I didn't mind waiting while she found a pen and asked who she should make the check out to.

Then it was my turn. I counted out my money, those old limp dollar bills, and watched them go into the pile of ones in the cash drawer.

I was ashamed for a minute, standing in line at the 24-hour grocery at just past 4 o'clock in the morning, thinking what would my mama say if she could see me in my greasy jeans and my old jean jacket, hair not washed in days, but then the clerk handed me a plastic bag and a few coins and I forgot all that and left the store, heading back in the direction of the cabin.

The door was unlocked so I walked right in, nice as you please, and locked it up again. The eyes in them pictures was still watching me, but they didn't seem so spooky no more. I could see now that they were just watching, paying attention.

When I went upstairs to check on him, Jeremiah was still asleep. I took off my jacket and put it on the table with the wood bowl full of apples. I could hear rain, just starting, on those high windows. I was glad I was back already when that happened. It made me think again that I'm lucky, or we're lucky together. I always feel that way when I'm with him.

The kitchen was at the back most part of the house, far away from the road, so I took a chance and turned on the little light over the stove. The kitchen was real clean and nothing was out on the counters at all. I found a

frying pan in one of the cabinets underneath. I wanted to cook eggs the way my stepdaddy showed me. It's funny, I thought. He might be at home, cooking eggs right this second for all I know. If you believe in some kind of a parallel universe, I thought to myself, maybe he's even making breakfast for my old self, right now at the same time I'm standing here, making breakfast for somebody else.

So I was thinking about him the whole time I was frying the bread, frying those eggs, kicking myself for not remembering to look around the store for a pat of butter or some such so the eggs don't stick, never mind that I didn't have enough to pay for it, because these house people don't have even the slightest thing to cook with in this big old kitchen, and wishing we had real juice, and coffee to go in the coffee pot, and then also cream and sugar, but there had to be some limits. They had plates, at least, and forks.

I set the pan to soak and then I went and woke Jeremiah before the food could get cold.

After we ate, it was still dark out and raining even more, and Jeremiah wanted to go back to the bearskin. He wanted to lie there naked again, and go back to sleep after. His hands were already trying to pull me down and unbutton my jeans. He wanted to stay there all day and probably all night besides,

but it gave me a jittery feeling to stay in one place too long. I was too scared of getting caught, and it was just something that was always in the back of my brain, if you want to know the truth. I was never not worried about somebody walking in and finding me lying on the floor on their bear rug.

Still, though, I laid my body down with Jeremiah. I did love him, I do, and I wanted to feel him inside me, all around me, holding me close.

It was so peaceful then, with the sound of the rain on the windows, and I don't know when we woke up again. It was daytime but still darkish because of the weather.

I got up and cleaned the kitchen, the forks and plates we'd used. I scrubbed up the pan real good, making sure to get all them nasty burned-on bits washed down the sink. I dried everything with paper towels, and put the paper towels and all the garbage from breakfast in a plastic bag in my backpack. I was planning to throw that bag away somewhere, maybe outside the gas station next time we stopped to buy a box of those little powdered doughnuts.

Soon, I knew we were going to leave again, sneak back out the window with the broken latch, and close it up tight so no one would ever know we'd been inside. I wanted to leave the skin of the house smoothed down, perfect, just the way we found it, with no little scars or stains.

First, though, I took Jeremiah in the bathroom. We hadn't had a real shower in I couldn't remember when. Just a quick wash in the sinks at the public library or at the park before the guy came to lock those bathrooms up for the night. There was no soap in this shower, but then why would they leave it? I brought the dish soap from the kitchen, and it made my hair feel too dry but I didn't care. It was just nice to feel clean for once.

We had to dry off with our dirty clothes, the best parts we could find of them, and then we went back up to the living room and pulled out what we had left in our backpacks, underwear and shirts that I'd washed at the laundry last time we had a few quarters.

Jeremiah said we should've thought of this before, that these people probably had a washer and dryer tucked away somewhere, but now it was too late to look. He looked aggravated because even though I know he wanted to stay, I'd put all these thoughts in his head about leaving. I was just so paranoid about these people coming in and finding us here.

Where we gonna go? he was asking. You know it'll be cold tonight.

I was starting to get the shakes. Jeremiah had already gotten dressed, and I wanted to pull on my clothes, too, but I couldn't make myself do it. I knew we needed to hurry, but I felt so tired all of a sudden. I didn't have the energy

to do what I needed to do. So instead I lay down and wrapped myself up in the bear's skin. I just wanted to disappear. I was shaking and shaking. My teeth, my muscles—everything ached.

Stop it, Jeremiah said, and I don't know why, but I just couldn't stop. I cried all over that bear's white fur. I could feel it soft against my face, against my arms and legs and back, and I felt like I was the bear, or the bear was me, or some mix of the two, if that makes sense.

All the time I was crying, I knew that soon I'd have to get up and put on my clothes and leave this house, but I didn't want our honeymoon to be over yet; I didn't want this to be the end of it. So I lay there as long as I could, trying to remember everything that had happened.

Why you cryin'? Jeremiah asked. His voice was so far away he might as well have been in another room.

I could hear him sigh and unzip his jacket.

Finally, I wiped my eyes and let go of the bear's fur and became myself again. I smoothed him out as best I could, and I got my clothes and backpack on, and then Jeremiah and I went out the window of the cabin and back to our own life.

Leah Browning is the author of three nonfiction books for teens and pre-teens and four chapbooks. Her fiction and poetry have recently appeared in *Superstition Review*, *Newfound*, *The Homestead Review*, *Santa Ana River Review*, *Bellows American Review*, *Waypoints*, *Random Sample Review*, and *Coldnoon*. Browning's work has also been published in The Poetry Storehouse, on materials from Broadsided Press and Poetry Jumps Off the Shelf, and in anthologies including *Nothing to Declare: A Guide to the Flash Sequence* from White Pine Press. In addition to writing, Browning serves as editor of the *Apple Valley Review*. Her website is located at www.leahbrowning.com.